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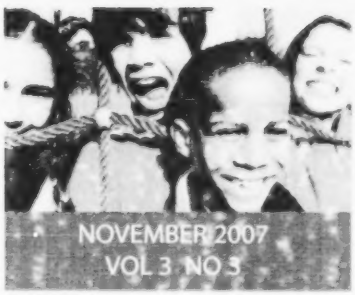

Okanagan Adoption Partnerships

To commemorate Adoption Month, we are pleased to present the following article by Rod Barrett, MCFD Community Services Manager, Okanagan Adoption. Rod's article tells the history of adoption placement in the Okanagan.

About two decades ago our little adoption team, which had just been created, began to discuss how we could do better adoption casework. Adoptions had a bad name with social workers because so many placements had broken down in the past causing children to return to our care. We, however, believed in adoption and wanted to find ways to make it work for our children.

Two events occurred at about that time that supported our efforts. First, we were selected for a pilot project that was aimed at better preparing children for adoption placement. Secondly, a conference on adoptions was held in Vancouver that changed our minds about how children should be placed.

The project allowed us to partner with a community agency in Kelowna to provide a worker who, as time went by, became an expert in preparing children for adoption. That partnership has grown over the years and today two agency staff work closely with our adoption and guardianship workers to prepare children for placement.

At that long ago adoption conference we met Kay Donley who headed an adoption agency in the American mid-west. She told us about their ground-breaking work in "building" adoption placements. Her work convinced us that we had to better prepare adoptive parents, just as our new project was telling us the same thing about better preparing children.

More importantly, we were told to abandon "matching" as our primary means to find placements. It became clear that an adoption study of a family, no matter how good, would not tell us what it was like to live in their home. And no history of a child really accurately tells his or her story for a family to consider.

In those days, it was our practice to match children and families based on their studies and histories, and when we found matches we sent children off across the province for placement. There really was no preparation for either, and little support after placement had taken place. If it worked, if they were compatible, it was more a matter of luck than good planning, but we believed at the time that this was good adoption practice. Too many breakdowns occurred as a result of this practice with guardianship workers being very reluctant to refer children for adoption planning.

It was also ministry policy at the time that foster parents were not allowed to adopt. So, children often had to leave the family they had come to know as theirs for the sake of being moved to another for adoption.

In our new practice we began to focus on the needs of children to be adopted, not just their characteristics, and we inventoried adoptive families on the basis of their strengths and experiences, not just their family life.

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BRITISH COLUMBIA

YOUR CONNECTION TO THE MINISTRY OF CHILDREN & FAMILY DEVELOPMENT & OUR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Meet Karen Dellert, Chief Information Officer

Karen Dellert, CIO

I joined MCFD in September 2006 as the Chief Information Officer (CIO). I am very proud to be a part of a ministry focused on supporting children, youth and families.

Previously, I was the Assistant Deputy Minister of Revenue Services with the Ministry of Small Business and Revenue, and before that, CIO for the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.

During my 20-year public service career, I have had the privilege of leading several projects that involved collaborating with multiple stakeholders and developing partnerships focused on improving client services and business outcomes through enabling technology. For me, that is what technology is really about – improving services and outcomes for the people we serve.

A key focus for the CIO team is the Information Systems Transformation (IST) Initiative. The objectives of this initiative are to improve outcomes for children, youth and families; support front line staff; replace obsolete technology; and improve information sharing. We are working closely with the Ministries of Employment & Income Assistance and Labour & Citizens' Services to achieve those objectives. I look forward to discussing the IST initiative with staff and learning more about the important work you do during future IST information sessions.

In my personal time I enjoy traveling with my family. I am also a Guide leader and enjoy taking the girls camping and teaching them outdoor skills.

Homecoming Ceremony Honours Families

Reproduced with permission of the Vancouver Aboriginal Child & Family Services (VACFSS)

It may seem like a simple ceremony: two families sitting in a circle listening to an Elder speak followed by a presentation of blankets, then a potluck and songs of honour. But to these two families, and many more who have experienced a Homecoming ceremony, it is much greater. It is a celebration to honour the hard work of a parent to be reunited with his or her child. It is an opportunity to reaffirm the positive in a family and give the children a chance to see their parents supported by a community in their role as a parent.

The Homecoming ceremony was first introduced to VACFSS by Child Protection social worker Laurie McDonald and has involved Elder Brenda Wesley in previous ceremonies. Being aware of its personal and cultural importance, VACFSS Family Preservation counselors Sharon Priest-Nagata, Marguerite Laliberte, Eugene Moore and Sandra Gray made sure to honour these families while keeping the tradition of the Homecoming ceremony part of VACFSS's services. We want to "revive our Aboriginal cultural practices within our mainstream child welfare agency," says Sandra Gray speaking of the ceremony's importance.

This particular ceremony, which took place on May 4th at the VACFSS Clark Drive office was attended by Musqueam Elder Stogan, who thanked the Creator for helping these families reunite. As one of the families was Métis, originally haling from the Red River region of Manitoba, Eugene Moore presented the mother with a traditional Métis multi-coloured sash that he had made for the occasion as an acknowledgement of her identity.

The mothers and their children were wrapped in blankets to honour their courage in overcoming the challenges they have faced, and to focus attention on the value of children. The importance of families, friends, and staff in the celebration was expressed by the inclusion of everyone in a Round Dance while Russell Podgurny and Gunner sang songs to honour the mothers and their children.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

November: Adoption Awareness Month

December 3: International Day of Disabled Persons

December 6: National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women

December 7: SOS Children's Village BC - presents An Evening of Song, Dance & Inspiration, Surrey BC

December 10: International Human Rights Day

January 1: BC's 150th Anniversary

January 30 - February 2: Early Years Conference, Vancouver BC

BRITISH COLUMBIA
The Best Place on Earth
YOUR CONNECTION TO THE MINISTRY OF CHILDREN & FAMILY DEVELOPMENT & OUR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Life Books

Written by Kim Behrenz, Adoption Recruitment Social Worker, Vancouver Coastal Region, MCFD

What is a Life Book?

- A book that stores memories, history, hopes and dreams.
- Something to document the past, present and future.
- The best gift in the world for a foster or adopted child.
- A simple, powerful tool to promote trust and attachment.
- Required for every foster child.

A Life Book is a record of a foster or adopted child's life that includes information about the child's birth family and each foster family he or she has lived with. A Life Book is more than a traditional "baby book" or scrapbook because it includes all information about the child and his or her past, present and future.

When a child is raised in their biological family, family members are able to share cute baby stories, nicknames and dates of various developmental milestones. When a child is in foster care, they often lose this information and it is one of the jobs of the foster family to fill in the blanks and ensure that there are no missing pieces. If you don't have much information about the child's life before they came to your home, let truth be your guide and keep it age appropriate. You can even contact former foster parents to get photos and more information.

Each little piece of information you can provide for the child is precious. Life Books help put all the pieces of information together so that the child can make sense of, and ultimately feel good about, his or her history. Because it may include sensitive parts of the story, a Life Book is not meant to be shared outside the immediate family.

"I wish Life Books were available 22 years ago. Maybe I wouldn't have so many unanswered questions."
Kate, age 22, adult adoptee.

What are some of the benefits of a Life Book?

A Life Book provides structure for adults when sharing difficult material with the child and it reduces fantasies about birth parents. It allows the child the opportunity to recognize and resolve strong feelings related to their past and to identify positives, as well as negatives, about their family of origin. It allows the child to develop a positive identity, self esteem and pride in their cultural heritage. It is also used to prepare children for a move, either to another foster home or to an adoptive family and reduce separation and loss issues.

The Best Practices Committee for Vancouver North has created a new Life Book format that will be given to every child in care. The new format includes wonderfully illustrated pages with fill-in-the-blanks to make it as easy as possible for foster parents. Of course, you are welcome to add more pages and information. A group of youth in care have been hired to compile the books so you should be receiving them soon. If you would like one for a child or youth in your home, speak with your resource worker.

The best way to work on the Life Book is to sit down with the child and go through the pages, working on them together. Even young kids can help by selecting pictures or making drawings to add to the book. Don't try to do it all at once and don't put it off forever because each child deserves to have their life preserved.

"Let your good intentions carry you
When the words don't come out right
And give all those children memories
To treasure throughout life."

In Brief

UNBC Students Earn Degree

Congratulations to UNBC social work practicum students, Gina Mastroianni (Prince Rupert) and Jennifer Mitton (Terrace) for completing the requirements for their Bachelor of Social Work degree. Convocation took place in September.

Aboriginal CYMH Team Operational

The Aboriginal Children and Youth Mental Health team in the Vancouver Island region is now fully staffed and operational. The team is co-located with the Aboriginal Children's Services team at the Esquimalt office. They are actively developing a model of service delivery and making connections within all communities, key partners and colleagues.

Appreciation BBQ for Foster Parents

Terrace and Axis Family Resources, a foster support contractor, hosted a foster parent appreciation barbecue in Terrace on July 21. Several MCFD staff attended the event along with 68 foster families and children.

FAMILY MATTERS
YOUR CONNECTION TO THE MINISTRY OF CHILDREN & FAMILY DEVELOPMENT & OUR SERVICE PROVIDERS
BRITISH COLUMBIA
The Best Place on Earth

MCFD Green Team

The Province of British Columbia is committed to its goal of leading the world in sustainable environmental management. Premier Campbell's commitment is to reduce British Columbia's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 33 per cent by 2020. New legislative measures will be introduced this fall that will mandate GHG reduction targets and provide legal tools to implement a Provincial GHG strategy. Achieving this goal will require a multi-faceted strategy involving every ministry of government.

In order to help meet these provincial goals, MCFD has created a Green Team, led by executive sponsor, Sarf Ahmed, regional contacts, and members of the Capital and Administrative Services Team.

The goal of the Green Team is to reduce MCFD's carbon footprint, as much as possible, in an economically sound way. In achieving this goal, the Green Team will align with the following objectives:

- Develop partnerships with MCFD stakeholders; including ministry regions and programs; children, youth, and their families; Aboriginal communities; and service providers
- Encourage and incorporate ideas and participation from all MCFD employees, regions, and stakeholders
- Acknowledge stakeholder and employee GHG reduction successes

The MCFD Climate Action plan is in its initial stages; however, key strategies and accomplishments have already been achieved. One of the fundamental strategies is to increase the Green I.Q. of community service providers through awareness and promotion. MCFD will prepare and distribute carbon neutral literature to daycares, lending libraries, family resource centres and all MCFD service providers. In addition, a recent Climate Change Challenge requested MCFD employees to submit ideas on how to reduce carbon produced by the ministry. Over 500 ideas were submitted by 125 people. Three of these ideas were submitted for Green Ideas Shine; a provincial initiative that encourages employees to forward their proposals for GHG reductions.

MCFD is proud to announce two carbon reduction initiatives that will significantly reduce GHG emissions, contributing to a healthier and more secure world for our children:

- The Burnaby Youth Justice Services Centre – This project, to replace the current Burnaby Youth Custody Services and Youth Forensic Psychiatric Services program facilities, is striving to be the first correctional facility in Canada to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. Additional information can be found at the Canada Green Building Council (CaGBC) website.
- Hybrid vehicle fleet - The Ministry purchased 106 additional hybrid vehicles in fiscal 2007/08. This brought the Ministry's total hybrid vehicle count up to 135 – far surpassing any other provincial Ministry. MCFD plans to achieve a hybrid vehicle ratio of over 80 per cent, equating to at least 376 high-efficiency vehicles by 2012.

By making choices at home and at work that lower GHG emissions, we can each help create a healthier and more secure world for our children. If you are interested in participating in the MCFD Climate Action Plan by joining the MCFD Green Team or volunteering for events and activities, please e-mail the Green Team.

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

Are you a staff member or service provider involved in delivering an innovative program or service? Do you know someone who deserves to be recognized?

Click on the link below to send us your idea in 100 words or less and your suggestion may be featured in a future article. MCF.NewsletterFeedback@gov.bc.ca

Vancouver Gets Their 'Hands Talkin'

The Vancouver International Children's Festival takes place for a week over the Victoria Day holiday weekend in May featuring an international flavour of performers and tents set up with many cultural and educational activities.

The Services for Family and Community Development, under Provincial Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Burnaby, had the opportunity to collaborate with the Family Network for Deaf Children's Deaf Youth Today program, the Canadian Deaf-Blind Rubella Association, British Columbia Chapter and the Douglas College Interpreter's program to set up the Hands Talkin' tent at this year's festival.

Inside the Hands Talkin' tent.

The Hands Talkin' tent is a chance for deaf and/or deaf-blind people to share their experiences with others. Over the span of three days, hundreds of people came into our tent and got to experience the different types of activities, which included interactive sign language classes and a demonstration of various technical devices that deaf/deaf-blind people use in everyday life. The fact that most of the staff and volunteers were deaf or hard of hearing had a huge influence on people and their perspective of the activities in the tent. The impact of the Hands Talkin' tent on the community was widespread. In a sense, we allowed them to learn about how we live our lives as deaf/deaf-blind people.

It was a powerful experience being a part of Children's Festival and fostering community awareness at the same time. We would like to encourage anyone who is interested to come out the week of May 12 including the Victoria Day weekend in 2008 to Vanier Park in Vancouver and check out the Hands Talkin' tent.

Poetry Contest for Children in Care

In April 2007, the Foster Family Recruitment and Training team ran a Poetry Contest for children in care in the Vancouver Coastal Region. The invitation to participate in this contest was mailed to each individual child and youth in a personalized letter. They were offered the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about being in foster care or any other topic that mattered to them. Many wonderful poems were submitted. Here is an example of one of our finalists, written by 14-year-old Chris.

My Special Mom

Remember me
Remember who I used to be
A grey, blue gasping baby,
Unhealthy, but she took me in

My Foster mom was sent to me
Watched me breath night and day
Hoping I don't go away
Now I'm proud to say: I Love You

A toddler pink and healthy
Who made the doctors wealthy
It was quite the task
That my mother did ask

14 years old
I am alive
My mom always said
You will survive

Hearts and roses all around
My special mom is still around
My love for her is very strong
It continues as I write this song

It was a great pleasure for the recruitment team to organize a Pizza Party, with the help of Nat's Pizzeria, to announce the contest winners. Grand prizes of bikes and MP3 players were generously donated by Toys "R" Us, while all other entries won gift certificates. Overall the party was a great success, giving everyone an opportunity to appreciate the many talents of our children in care and allowed an avenue to have their voices heard!

Okanagan Adoption Partnerships cont'd...

We based our matches on that, and then began the process of building the placement. Kay Donley convinced us that a bond would develop between child and family as they began to know each other and to solve problems together before they made a commitment to each other.

The key is to facilitate this process at the outset while the family and child has our support, not after placement when they have to deal with these problems on their own and perhaps feeling as though they had been forced to make a commitment to each other without first developing a bond. This led us to focus on local placements. It's difficult to develop a placement in this manner if it's being made a long distance from the child's community. A local placement allows for a partnership between the guardianship worker who knows the child, and the adoption worker who has studied and approved the prospective adoptive family. Together they oversee the initial match based on the needs of the child and the skills of the family throughout all the steps of placement and completion. In this way, child and social worker remain together during this critically important time.

The use of local placements also maintains the child's roots in their community, and it preserves their attachment to school, friends, family, neighbourhoods, and the sights and sounds of their world. Building an attachment to a new forever family is made easier if the child's other bonds are not severed. If a placement results in a child moving out of their community or across the province, he or she must start life over again. The support and comfort of those who have been important to them disappears when they move.

Some years ago, when the new legislation was introduced that created licensed agencies, the community contractor who had been doing our child preparation work was successful in becoming licensed to do adoption work. That strengthened our partnership, though we were cautioned by the ministry to keep an arm's length from these agencies, and not to collaborate with them. For us it was too late to follow those instructions.

> Partnership is a part of our daily activities ... we can't do it alone.

Today, in partnership with the agency, Kelowna Community Resources, we have woven their services together with ours and we act as one to support successful adoption placements. At a recent meeting Bill Downie, the executive director of the agency, and I marvelled at all the talk of distrust between agencies and the ministry. In contrast to this, our agency delivers our Adoption Education Program, uses the SAFE assessment study format, and contracts to do our additional home studies. We make referrals to each other when we believe an applicant or parent would be better served by the other. Trust or distrust is never a topic of our discussions.

Our collaboration with others in the adoption sector goes beyond our partnership with the agency. We work closely with the Adoptive Family Association (AFA) and their local coordinator to support adoptive families. Together with the agency, the AFA and our staff present workshops, hold family days, and jointly recruit adoptive applicants. Partnership is a part of our daily activities.

We recently collaborated with Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services in Victoria to develop a life book for our children and youth. Their Creating a Path life book for Aboriginal children impressed us so much that we proposed a partnership with them to develop a book for non-Aboriginal children. Some six months after we agreed to collaborate on the project the new life book was published, and we now have a new partner in our quest for more and better adoption placements.

Over the years our focus has been on making adoption placements more successful for our children and youth, and for the families who adopt them. At the same time, we found this new approach also allowed us to increase our numbers. Last year we completed 45 placements in the Okanagan. As a result we have rebuilt guardianship workers faith in adoptions so that we now have more referrals than we can handle. The word is out in our communities that our adoptions work, so recruitment is made easier. Our partnerships support us to continue this good practice. We can't do it alone.

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